

ISRAEL IN OUR LIVES

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# TEACHING ISRAEL: BASIC ISSUES AND PHILOSOPHICAL GUIDELINES

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## DEAR COLLEAGUE,

As we approach the twenty-first century, we are entering a new period regarding the place of Israel in the lives of contemporary Jews. The historic eras of struggling for a homeland and creating a state are over. The State of Israel has been in existence since 1948. It is a modern country which, while beset with problems and challenges, has established itself as a vibrant and dynamic contemporary Jewish society. Israel has changed; the North American Jewish community has changed; and the world that we live in has changed. Consequently, the challenges facing Israel and world Jewry at the end of the century are different than those faced by the Zionist Movement and the fledgling state in prior decades.

As we enter the new millennium, two educational challenges call out to us. The first challenge is to make Israel a dynamic and living force in the personal life of every modern Jew. While there is little doubt that Israel has become a major factor in the life of the Jewish people as a whole, it is less clear that enough Jews are personally touched and moved by the miracle called Israel. Consequently, great energy needs to be invested in making Israel "speak" to every Jew in a very personal and compelling way. Such a personal connection between Israel and North American Jewry will ideally enrich young people in both societies, as Jews and as human beings.

The second challenge is to significantly increase the number of Jews - particularly young Jews - who visit Israel. We have been successful in bringing Israel's survival needs to the attention of North American Jewry; now we must devote great energy to enabling Jews to actually visit Israel. In the coming decades we should aspire to bring great numbers of Jews to Israel within the framework of meaningful and well-planned educational programs. Indeed a positive Israel Experience can be a vital part of the Jewish education and development of contemporary young people, and our young deserve to have such a wonderful opportunity.

***Israel In Our Lives*** is a series of Guides aimed at helping you to respond to these two challenges. These Guides serve two purposes:

To suggest ways to help you in introducing the idea of Israel into the lives of your constituents in an interesting and accessible manner.

To suggest ways to help you in promoting the idea of a visit to Israel - "The Israel Experience" - as a critical Jewish experience for every young Jew.

These Guides are intended to help lay and professional leaders (rabbis, educators, board members, youth workers, camp directors, early childhood supervisors, and others) in their effort to introduce the idea of Israel and the challenge of an Israel Experience to their constituents. They are not program materials or curricula. Rather, they are planning documents intended to help you in your work. The Guides can be used in staff and in-service sessions devoted to the place of Israel in your organization; in policy planning sessions with your board and professional leadership; in retreats and programs with your constituents and members, and in numerous other ways.

The Guides have been created by teams of North American and Israeli Jewish educators working together. They are part of a new venture now being undertaken by a partnership of North American and Israeli agencies to promote the Israel Experience as a major priority in twenty-first century Jewish life.

The Guide you are holding is meant to serve as a companion to the other titles in the series *Israel In Our Lives*. As such, it deals not with practical approaches, but rather raises an array of educational and philosophical issues connected to the challenge of bringing Israel into the lives of North American Jews. We look forward to receiving your feedback about the issues and suggestions raised in this and complementary Guides in the series. We hope that *Israel In Our Lives* will serve you in your blessed efforts to establish Israel as a deep and rich dimension of the lives of our young and our old.

Barry Chazan, Elan Ezrachi, Rafi Sheniak, Barbara Sutnick  
Jerusalem, 1997

## ISRAEL IN OUR LIVES

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## PART ONE: LOOKING BACK

Some generations back, say, two hundred years ago, no one would have understood the problem of teaching Israel. There was then no State of Israel. Yet, though the overwhelming majority had never seen it and had no clear idea about its concrete physical reality, almost all Jews were vitally connected to *Eretz Yisrael* (The Land of Israel). This connectedness was created, first and foremost, by the fact that most Jews living then, whether in North America (there weren't many!) or in Germany, Russia or Morocco, were perceived by gentiles and by themselves as being "in exile." The meaning of *Eretz Yisrael* was as obvious as the meaning of the Jewish lives they lived. Judaism and all it encompassed was their total identity. And that naturally included "The Land of Israel."

# A People Without a Land

What brought about this unfortunate and unnatural situation of *galut*, exile? As Jews everywhere knew from their study of Torah and from their prayers, "Because of our sins we have been exiled from our land..." The people of Israel had not lived faithfully (enough) by God's covenant. Those interested in historical detail knew that some seventeen hundred years before, the legions of Rome had defeated the Judean nation in war, destroying the Holy Temple and scattering (in stages, throughout hundreds of years) its people. Since then, much of Jewish life had been spent remembering, mourning, and waiting.

To be a Jew in 1800 still meant, for almost everyone, to live within a liturgical and ritual tradition that was saturated with exile - and the hope of the foretold Return. The Land of Israel and Jerusalem had a prominent place in the prayers recited thrice daily, and in the blessing recited after each meal. Five or six times a day, God was implored to "rebuild Jerusalem." The holy land and the holy city were mentioned at weddings: under the wedding canopy celebrants were assured that "there will still be heard in the cities of Judah and the streets of

Jerusalem the sounds of happiness and rejoicing and the voices of bridegrooms and brides." The words of comfort to mourners were also a liturgy, wishing them that they merit being "consoled in the consolation of Zion and Jerusalem." There were entire days given over to national mourning, particularly the day of the Temple's destruction, the ninth of Av (Tisha B'Av) on which Jews sat on the floor in stockinged feet and literally wept as they read the biblical Book of Lamentations attributed to the prophet Jeremiah, a witness to the destruction of the first Temple by the Babylonians.

But there was also hope and anticipation. The redemption would come. God would take His people out of captivity and restore them to their land, just as Ezekiel had foreseen in his vision of dry bones. These bones, strewn about without hope, would again be covered with flesh and stand upon their feet, a mighty host, taken out of their graves and returned upright to their soil (Ezekiel 37). In God's good time, the exile would end and the nations would acknowledge the sovereignty of God. That would mark the advent of the Messianic age.

Some Jews even two hundred years ago, especially if they were in Western Europe or in the new nation called the United States of America, already entertained certain doubts. They may have seriously considered the notion that the great revolutions of their times, the French and the American, had created a new world, heralding blessing and freedom for all. Some were already insisting that a genuine Messianic redemption had begun, putting an end to exile without anyone having to move to the land now called Palestine. Some were becoming skeptical about the religious beliefs of Judaism and its requirement to wait for God's redemptive acts and live by (possibly) outdated laws. There were great things happening that made ancient hopes seem quaint, and obsessive. There were new nation-states that had their own humanly devised laws, guided in their promulgation by universal reason. Who needed more than that?



**This way of thinking** became more widespread through a movement known as the Enlightenment. Furthermore, in many Western countries Jews began to enjoy what became known as Emancipation. They were given or promised the rights of citizenship. They were invited, though not always with sincerity, to see themselves as members of the nations which had, until then, grudgingly hosted them and sporadically persecuted them.



Yet, the absence of Emancipation in the Eastern European countries of most dense Jewish settlement, and the obstinate endurance of hatred of Jews (now "scientifically" dubbed antisemitism) in enlightened lands, spurred a movement for a radical solution to what its leaders called "the problem of the Jews." That movement was called Zionism and its flamboyant leader who thought he had the solution to that problem was Theodore Herzl.

## Modern Zionism Arise

**The radical solution** was to return the Jews to their ancient land, just as the Jewish tradition had foreseen, but with a difference. Most of the leaders of the new movement were indifferent to religion; they did not anticipate divine redemption and did not think that exile was caused by sin. For them, the only sin of the Jews was passivity, the failure to redeem themselves, as nations such as Greece and Italy and Germany were doing, through national liberation movements. They wanted Jews to be "a nation among the nations," to save them from their unhappy status of being everywhere, guests. They were determined not to be emancipated by others but to emancipate themselves. They were ready to build on religious memories of their people and even invited religious Jews to join them, but the rules were clear: Hebrew, a centerpiece of the "national heritage," would be a spoken and secular language, not a holy tongue. Perhaps, as Herzl suggested, it would not be spoken at all. (He thought

it might be better to make German the language of the renewed Jewish state.) Jews would live by their own "rational" and progressive laws, in their thoroughly modern and "enlightened" commonwealth. Religion would be a private matter.

Not everyone was enamored of this idea of Zionism. Cultural Zionists like Ahad Ha'am believed that Jewish culture was morally superior to that of the Christian world, or at least Jewishly more authentic for Jews. They considered Herzl's political Zionism a form of assimilation to gentile norms and ideas under the cloak of Hebrew. Many traditionally religious Jews viewed it as an act of impudence, a veritable rebellion against God. Jews living in nations that had enfranchised them, like the United States, England, France, and Germany, were concerned that Zionism would call their civic loyalties into question. Most of them, especially those already acculturated, looked upon Zionism as a regressive movement that sought to return the Jews to their past, to a previous stage of history long left behind in the march towards a pristinely spiritual identity.

In North America, the few who were unabashedly Zionists were mainly members of an immigrant generation, traditional Jews who pasting together Ahad Ha'am and Herzl, saw the old-new homeland as a haven both for Jewish culture and for the homeless Jews still trapped in benighted lands. There were even a number of Western Jews who found their true Jewish identities by "going on aliyah" and others who took part in philanthropic enterprises, like the advancement of medical care in Israel, so impressively undertaken by the Hadassah movement in the United States. However most of the others in the Western democracies, and sometimes even the professed Zionists, were pre-occupied by the national ethos and aspirations of their own countries. True, alongside it and from the distance, many admired the new city-builders, the pioneers, the romance of modern Palestine. Even so, the land remained somewhat remote for them: a vision, not an emergent reality.



**After the Holocaust, all that changed.** The nightmare of the political Zionists, that without a homeland Europe's Jews were doomed, had materialized beyond anyone's direst fears. Palestine, which was now home to a thriving *yishuv* (Jewish settlement) became the obvious home for the survivors. Yet it was generally agreed that the *yishuv's* struggle for Jewish statehood was much more: it was a last and dramatic hope for the resurrection of the dry bones of the crematoria, restored to life in an unprecedented historical drama. Some thousand days after the end of World War II, with its massive destruction of European Jewry, a Jewish state named Israel came into being and valiantly defended itself against the forces of all surrounding Arab states.

# The Emergence of the Jewish State

From then on, Israel began to be an aspect, central or peripheral, of almost every Jew's consciousness. For many it became the most cogent embodiment of Jewish life, certainly more universally and traditionally "Jewish" than some of the early Zionists had envisioned it would be. When Israel's existence seemed endangered, in the weeks before the Six Day War of 1967, the process of the "Israelization" of Jewish consciousness among Diaspora Jews was consummated. In June 1967, Jews throughout the world perceived the danger to "The Jewish State" as a threat to their own existence. In Israel too it was perceived as an overpowering Jewish event: after their astounding victory secularists wept upon returning to the Western Wall, the only remnant of the ancient Temple, and everyone spoke of miracles. Modern Jewish history seemed to have come together, and some religious Jews claimed that everything that was happening, even secular Zionism - the brazen disregard for religion by the state's architects and builders - even the unparalleled sufferings of the Holocaust, was all part of a pattern of divine redemption. The exile was ending. The process of Return had begun and the prophecy of Isaiah rang with the compelling actuality of a banner headline:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger of good tidings, that announces peace...Break forth into joy, sing together, you waste places of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem (52:7, 9)

Today, some thirty years later, that historical moment is recalled as one of the most dramatic in Jewish history. Like all great moments in Jewish history, it continues to instruct us, though there are some who say that it presently misguides and deceives us. In dream-like memory and cruel awakening, it affects the present in many ways. *Yom Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem Day) is part of what was then and of what we still are. The political controversies about the current peace process between Israel and its Arab neighbors including the Palestinians, is part of it. The insistence of both major political parties that Jerusalem will never again be divided, is part of the memory and a brake, though some would say a wistful one, on the unraveling of that great moment.



In the meantime, a score and ten years have gone by. The human and even the physical landscape has changed. A new generation that never experienced persecution has arisen: in

# Israel Today - A Completely New Reality

Israel itself, the parents and grandparents of almost half of the young generation originate in the Islamic lands of North Africa and the Middle East. For these tribes of Israel, the land never ceased to be a religious symbol; it was never secularized as the embodiment of a "solution." More recently, over half a million Russian Jews have arrived in

the country. For some of them, Jewishness itself is a novelty; for most, religious symbols and Jewish cultural life are alien.

The majority of all living Israelis have not personally experienced their country's political establishment; those moving into their thirties have never known an Israel confined to its pre-1967 "green line" borders. There are more Orthodox people in Israel than Herzl could have envisioned, and they are very different from one another: "Lithuanian" Yeshiva types, Sefaradim, right-wing political Zionists settled in Judea and Samaria ("the West Bank"), Hasidim. For all of them too, Israel is a fact of life; Hebrew, a spoken language. There are also many Israelis who are uncertain about their Jewish identities and even some who are not concerned with the question at all. For them, being Israeli is identity enough.

And, of course, there is a new generation in the Diaspora. Like their counterparts in Israel, they ask new questions about their Jewish identity. Many even feel that they can reject this identity and, conversely, that they are invited to choose it. Armed with this consciousness, considerable numbers of Jews are simply disappearing. Yet others are finding new energies to articulate their Judaism in ways that bear the imprint of new environments of freedom, and new spiritual challenges. For many Diaspora and Israeli Jews alike, the "other Jews" don't seem to matter so much anymore. Non-religious Israelis are only moderately interested in American Jews, though they are very much interested in America! For the majority of non-Orthodox Diaspora youth, Israel is far away, different. Paradoxically, when it looks the same as the place they come from: western, allegedly affluent, a land dotted with high tech industry and glitzy shopping malls, it seems even more irrelevant.

**And yet, the Jews remain a peculiar world people,** difficult to understand and impossible to define. Are we a religion like, say, Christianity? Then what are Jewish atheists? Are we a nation, like the Dutch? Then what are Jewish Americans? Are we a tribe, an enlarged family, with roots and memories? What, then, do people who are so different from one another have in common? What does a foreign country, even if it does have a Jewish majority, have to do with a Jew in Texas, especially, if he or she converted to Judaism? Why does Israel matter? How will Jews understand themselves better and see new vistas of opportunity in their Jewishness through the prism of Israel? These are the questions that underlie this discussion.

## PART TWO: ISRAEL ISSUES THROUGH THE EYES OF ISRAELIS

Israel is a small place, but it is rich in the significance that Jews bring to it, that they "remember" about it. Moreover, the person who looks at it finds certain objective data that set it apart from other places. How can it be described? What is special about it? What problems characterize it?

Let us look at five things that, taken together, are unique to Israel and its people. They are the features that Jews are most likely to think about when they think of Israel as an issue within their Judaism and their Jewish belonging. In this section we will examine these points primarily from an Israeli perspective; in Part Four, the same five points will be viewed through the eyes of North American Jews.



The very category "Israel" raises eyebrows. Isn't Judaism a world-view, a religion, a culture and a tradition? How can it have a land? Has not most of Jewish history been lived elsewhere?

Here, very briefly, is the way the Bible relates to these questions. God made a covenant with

# 1. Israel as the Land of Judaism

a particular family, to "walk in His ways," to do righteousness, to be His witnesses, to be a great nation, to be "a blessing." The religious mission given to the family of Israel,

to bring the divine Presence into the life of the families of the earth, into the social and political world, requires that the "witnesses" live a social-national life in a land assigned for that



purpose. The Bible refers to this land as God's inheritance but, in the covenantal scheme of things, it is the land for the people of Israel to be God's inheritance, as servants and partners. God's presence is symbolically there through the Temple, but also morally, through the just society demanded of Israel by the Torah. There are commandments that are applicable only in the land, such as the Sabbatical year in which fields must lie fallow, but they represent an entire social conception of a holy life, understood as a social and collective charge.

So, the Land of Israel is *Eretz Hakodesh*, the Land of the Holy. That sounds like an awkward way of saying, "the Holy Land," but it isn't. The Land of Israel is holy for Christians because "God walked there." For that faith community, the land of Israel captured a tremendously significant moment of divine history, through the person of Jesus. Moslems too consider the Land as holy because of the activity of Mohammed, the last and greatest of Allah's prophets. Thus for the Moslem, and even more, for the Christian the Holy Land is a place for pilgrimage, for walking "in the footsteps" of holiness. But for the tradition of Judaism, *Eretz Yisrael*, "the Land of the Holy" is not like that. It is the place of the Binding of Isaac, the place of divine worship in the Temple. It is the place where a holy life, morally, spiritually, even sexually, is required of the people of Israel lest, as the Torah warns, "the land will vomit you out."

After the divine Presence departed from the land, together with the people of Israel, it became, in a sense, even more holy. While living thousands of miles from Jerusalem, most Jews considered it common knowledge that the Messiah would enter the gates of Zion, and that he would judge the wicked of Edom from there. The resurrection of the dead "in latter days" would commence in Jerusalem. Jews who somehow reached the land, for pilgrimage or to die there, bowed to the holy ground and kissed its earth upon arriving. No wonder many hoped that a small packet of soil from *Eretz Yisrael* would be placed under their heads at the time of burial. No wonder that The Exile was associated with all the malaise of an unredeemed world, and The Return, with its final redemption and perfection.

No wonder, too, that the masses of Jews who were attracted to Zionism in Eastern Europe were galvanized by the idea of returning to "the land of holiness," where their ideals (now often secular and socialist ones) and their dreams of redemption (existential, social, national) would be realized. They spoke glowingly of *aliyah* (ascent) to the land. After all, they knew the verses from the Book of Psalms (24:3) by heart: "Who shall go up (*ya'aleh*) to the mount of the Lord? One of clean hands and pure heart, who has not sworn deceitfully..." They knew that, in Temple times, people "ascended" to the Temple on pilgrim festivals. They knew that one entered the land via the plains and then "ascended" to Jerusalem. They remembered well the psalmist's words, "I shall lift up my eyes unto the hills from whence my help comes." In going back, they were going up, returning to an ideally remembered self.

But, as they and we have discovered, it is not simple to live with remembered holiness, no matter whether it is revered or rejected. As the American-Jewish writer Maurice Samuel once observed, there are ghosts everywhere in the sacred land. The Mosque of Omar bestrides the place of the Temple. This is maddening if you wish to rebuild the Temple but fortuitous if you really do not. Archeologists on digs and contractors at housing developments discover ancient bones, part of the holy and heroic past, that the ultra-Orthodox demand be left undisturbed. Is the produce of the seventh year to be eaten in the land of the Sabbatical? How can a state in this country be less than an example of virtue for everyone else? How does one live with so much holiness? What other nation has to hear, in the foundational phrases of its language, from its landscapes, from its scholars who remember and its fanatics who constantly rebuke, that this land requires a holy and covenantal life, that being "vomited out" is a clear and present danger? How can one be truly secular in the land of Judaism? How can one bear the weight of genuine piety in the "Land of the Holy?"

Furthermore, the entire monotheistic world takes an interest in what the Jews, who after all rejected Christianity and Islam, are doing in The Holy Land. Is this the greatest historical romance of all time, the return of God's people to the land of covenant? Or is it the colossal impudent act of trespass of an infidel nation? The world can't make up its mind about the

nature of its astonishment: is it scandalized or impressed or even awed? In the meantime, this small people in its miniature commonwealth is seemingly always in the news and on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*. Is this a compliment, or a danger? Were the Zionists mistaken in thinking we could become a "nation among nations" in the land that so heavily imposes itself on the spirit?

And yet, which Israeli Jew will not point proudly, though sometimes with embarrassment, to the uniqueness of life in the land of ancient kings and prophets, to the price demanded for living in it, to the meanings mined from its rocky landscapes? On the beaches of the Philistine coast, on sunny Sabbath mornings, when colorful balloons fly about and fun reigns and life seems fine just the way it is, all that is forgotten. But not for long, never completely.

■

In the context of the lives of many Jews today, "Jewish peoplehood" seems like a strange idea, both jarring and reassuring. It is jarring because they think of their native lands as the place where their nation lives; it is reassuring in its message that the Jews too have a stake in contemporary history, that they are really there. Some scholars tell us that until the great increase in Jewish population in the nineteenth century Russian empire, which coincided with the

growth of national consciousness among many groups, including many who were subjugated to others and oppressed, Jews did not see themselves that way. They knew, of course, that

## 2. Israel as the Land Where the Jews Live as a People

they were God's people. He had, in the words of the blessing, chosen Israel "from among the nations . . . and given us His Torah" but that "nationhood" was somewhat liturgical. They also perhaps had heard of historical instances of a Jewish societal presence, where Jews had even had a share of power, like in "the Golden Age" of medieval Spain. Yet generally the reality was of *kehillot*, communities centered around religious and educational institutions.

**Certainly, Jews in the contemporary world** outside of Israel do not generally live their Jewish lives as a people. In fact, like the Gentiles around them, they are likely to be much less community-minded than their ancestors in Europe and North Africa or Iraq. They tend to live more as individuals, who choose to join others in some communal framework, or to refrain from affiliation. It is all as they desire and decide. Israel, on the other hand, is, in a sense, a completion of the process that began in Eastern Europe. In Israel there is a "critical mass" of Jews who through their institutions and national presence determine the "public space" of the country and what it should look like. Here, they are a majority.

And being "the people" of this place, one can see them on a social canvas. Here, all the qualities for which Jews have been known, or which they imagine themselves to possess, come into play. Jews think of themselves as being fiercely independent in judgment and are proud to proclaim that "where there are two Jews there are three opinions." On the other hand, Jews speak proudly of their sense of community and frequently cite the Talmudic adage that "all Israelites are responsible for one another." Thus, when under attack, this people that under normal circumstances admits to inordinate bickering, to petty and grand animosities, and to unending controversy, believes that it will stand like a solid wall against adversaries.

**Israel is the only place in the world** where one can see who the Jews are when they are responsible for the public sphere, when it is theirs. Problems arise that never surfaced in small groups of Jews or among individuals. It becomes clear that Jews do not necessarily shrug their shoulders existentially in the face of danger like they do in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Those who are responsible for the existence of an entire society learn different habits of

response. In fact, one discovers about the Jews what could have been picked up from reading the Bible: they have a warrior streak in them, and they are not naturally allergic to military arts. There is even some fanaticism among them: again, select chapters of the Bible strike that chord. Convictions are sometimes articulated in vigorous and not always delightful ways. Social habits as practiced "at home" are often uncouth.

Moreover, in Israel the Jews sometimes look too particularistic, not universal enough. This is not because Israelis are more "particularistic" than others, say the French or the English, but because we have not thought about Jewish existence in the way we think about France and England. On the other hand, in comparison with some other modern nations, many Jews in Israel will seem unduly universal, especially some who have moved away from religious tradition. One discovers that while the Jews of Israel have astoundingly "made themselves at home" in *Eretz Yisrael*, they also, at the same time, seem to have trouble taking national life in a national territory seriously. After all, isn't the "nationalism" of Judaism that of "The Book?"

**It takes time** to get used to being the people of this place. It also requires making room for the Arabs of Israel who are not "this people" but certainly of this place. So, should it be their public space too? Should there be a new "Israeli" entity? And yet, wasn't Israel established to make it possible for the Jews to live as a nation like all nations?

Herman Cohen, a German-Jewish philosopher who lived through the early years of the Zionist movement, was not fond of Zionism and even mocked it. On one occasion he disparagingly said of the Zionists: "These fellows wish to be happy," as though it was somehow undignified, a betrayal, for Jews to be happy before Messianic times. Jewish life was too complicated for Jews to be "fellows," to be happy, to be like other people could be. Cohen need not have worried. Indeed, the Jewish public space exudes energy and a desire to be happy. For those with historical perspective, the energy and the desire are often deeply moving and sometimes exhilarating. But nobody still thinks that being happy is simple.

To be a **political entity**, a state, is that feature of living as a people that focuses on the responsibility to govern; it is that aspect of Jewish life that also turns outward, to the relationship of the Jews as a people with other peoples. It has to do with power, its uses, and its limits. Thus it divides political parties and diverse administrations. It brings into view institutions of government like the Knesset and national symbols like the flag. These institutions generally make Israelis feel proud, identified. But Diaspora Jews may feel uncomfortable with them. After all, as Jews, they are not politically identified with them.

### 3. Israel as a Political Entity

For Israel, whose existence has been called into question from its very beginnings, the responsibility to govern is, to a large extent, the responsibility of the state. However

the responsibility to defend its citizens, in practice, falls upon these citizens themselves through army service. Naturally, therefore, the experience of military service has played a large role in the social and existential consciousness of the average Israeli Jew, erecting a social and even cultural barrier between him or her and Jews in the Diaspora. This divide also separates the average Israeli Jew from most Israeli Arabs, and to an extent, from those ultra-Orthodox Jews whose army service is indefinitely, usually permanently, deferred because of their yeshiva study.

The political life of Israel as a Jewish state is greatly complicated by the historical experience of persecution in the exile. On one hand, this political life is characterized by a great, almost overwhelming desire to be accepted and to gain the status of an equal among the nations, irrespective of past (or even present) religious differences, especially as these differences are considered part of history in the prevailing secular consciousness. On the other hand, this

historical experience engenders great suspicion among Jews. They fear that their isolation is still a dominant fact, perhaps a perennial one, of Jewish life. Israel has no natural bloc of allies; it is the only Jewish state. The Jews, even as a political entity, are still, so it is claimed, treated as enemies of Christ, as a pariah nation. The fact that the majority of political debates in the United Nations have had Israel as their subject, generally for rebuke or condemnation, re-enforce this perception.

The question, which of these two experiences - of having made it as a "nation among the nations," or having merely found a safer or higher ground for self-defense in a hostile world - is perhaps the main focus of political controversy in Israel today. Some believe that it is now becoming possible, thanks to Israel's perseverance and strength, to achieve a long-sought peace between Israel and its neighbors. Others see the peace process as a ploy designed to divest Israel of its strength and ultimately to destroy it. This controversy has aroused world-wide interest, an interest which is in itself open to diverse interpretations.



We have already mentioned Ahad Ha'am, the Zionist leader who envisioned a modern, largely secular, "reworking" of Judaism that would have its real address in the spiritual center to be established in *Eretz Yisrael*. Ahad Ha'am's conception, of course, reflected the world at the beginning of the century, when there was no fax or e-mail, no cheap travel nor the affluence to make such travel frequent, and no pervasive and electronically omnipresent "Western culture" in Jewish life. Yet, despite these developments, Israel still does largely understand itself as such an Ahad Ha'amian "place for Judaism," though different groups within the country have different understandings of what a

## 4. Israel as the Land of Jewish Culture

Jewish "place" should be like. After all, Israel is the only country in the world where the Jewish Sabbath and festivals are the official days of rest, where the Hebrew calendar is recorded on public documents together with the Gregorian one, where Hebrew is spoken and the Bible is an integral part of public school curriculum, where the public school is, except among Arabs, a Jewish school. On Yom Kippur the country still comes to a standstill and Purim brings with it a carnival atmosphere. And Israel, culturally if not politically, sees itself as "there" for all Jews, the entire "Jewish people." And yet, given the realities of the contemporary world, Jewish culture in Israel is not really as Ahad Ha'am envisioned it.

For one thing, Orthodox Jews, whom he considered a vestige of medieval life, play a vastly larger role in determining what counts as Jewish culture than he could have imagined. Much of the communal and visible Jewish cultural action is where they are: in religious settlements, in religious happenings like the dancing at the Western Wall on Simchat Torah, in legislation designed to protect the Jewish character of Israel. This legislation includes the maintenance of rabbinical courts, the unavailability of civil marriage, and the by-laws of most municipalities that prohibit public transportation on Sabbaths and festivals. Much of this, and especially the legislation, is condemned by its opponents as clerical. It is said to drive secular, or religious but non-Orthodox, Jews away from Judaism.

What some Jews consider most dangerous, and others, essential to the historical integrity of Judaism, is that the religious "establishment" of Israel, largely through Orthodox Jewry's political parties, insists on determining what "counts," not only as culture but as religion in Israel. True, Israel as a democratic state allows freedom to non-Orthodox religion, Conservative and Reform, but those get little public support or funding. In a sense, the status of these large and significant groups of world Jewry is like that of other religions. They can do what they want (except perform civilly recognized marriages and conversions) but they are mainly ignored, excluded from power. Some argue that this is a good thing, that what is grievously hurting religion in Israel is its proximity to and involvement in political



power, but there is an element of "sour grapes" in that argument.

So, the Jewish religion one sees in Israel, at least in its public manifestations, is predominantly different from what the non-Orthodox Israeli Jew associates with significant cultural and spiritual life, though it is what s/he associates with religion. Religion is often incomprehensible to Israelis, even primitive. Yet it is sometimes perceived as exotic, a plausible and tested address for existential leaps into faith and community.

The average Israeli, whether *hiloni* (secular) or *dati-moderni* ("religious but modern"), would like, in principle, to take pride in the varied Jewishness of Israeli culture. S/he is proud of serious Israeli film, literature, and art, and can point to its "Jewish influences" or character. Israelis will note that the knitted kipah is nowhere at home in the public sphere as it is in Israel, no less than the sun-burnt head of the kibbutznik and the well-cut suit of the businessman or the uninhibitedly displayed *tzitzit* (fringes) of the ultra-Orthodox Jew. Jewishness, in all shapes and garbs, has nothing to apologize for in the public space of Israel.

What sometimes troubles the "average" Israeli, secular or religious, is that the shared Jewishness of all is perhaps being lost. The religious one may come to feel that religious behavior in public is somehow suspect, and that the religious person is being de-legitimated. And secular people may be increasingly concerned that "the religious" think they have a monopoly on Jewishness and on values. In both groups there are individuals who worry that, in generations to come, not enough people will really care, either way, that different groups will live behind self-imposed walls.

In the span of forty years or so, Israel has changed radically. There is more poverty than there was, and almost no one is ideologically spartan. The orange groves are fewer, and the roads, replete with interchanges, are more numerous and wider. Israel is dotted by luxurious hotels, and there is an abundance of personal computers and cellular telephones. The

hot summers are increasingly transformed by air-conditioning; the winter chills are dissipated by efficient heating systems. Everywhere there are traffic jams as cities grow more dense and suburbs sprawl. At Israeli universities, one can study any recognized field and attain a degree in it. Preparing for a good life, that is, good for the individual, is very much

part of the scene.

## 5. Israel as a Thriving Western Country, Living a Natural Life

Israelis are justly proud of what they have achieved, and they see the economic, scientific, and cultural devel-

opment of Israel as, in some ways, a uniquely Jewish accomplishment. Despite the economic boycott of Israel by the Arab world, despite the paucity of natural resources, despite the underprivileged background of so many of its immigrant populations throughout the years, despite frequent wars and constant military call-ups, Jews have once again succeeded in wrenching achievement from adversity. Friendships made during compulsory army service have engendered closely knit business associations - and corporations. Self-reliance borne of isolation has led to inventiveness, and invention. Aridity has sparked irrigation techniques that draw international attention. Israel is a name in medical research, in high tech, and in problem-solving along the entire spectrum of modern society.

The generosity of world Jewry which has given unstintingly to Israel is part of that story. So is the "business head" of the proverbial Jew of yesteryear, which survived the revolution of Zionism, that ostensibly was to change Jews and make them more natural.

**There are shadows lurking in the corners.** The pioneering spirit languishes while kibbutzim play the stock market. Some social critics, here as elsewhere, tell us that the shopping mall, now unbelievably popular in Israel, incorporates the worst features of Levantine

market places and American consumer culture: noise, music, alternatively soothing and unsettling, the tyranny of fashion, the stupor of masses engaged in mindless shopping. And, of course, we are reminded that much depends on international investment, which depends on progress in the peace process.

Nor should one neglect to mention the growing gap between the "haves" and the "have nots" in Israeli society. How long until streets in Haifa and Tel Aviv become home to our own homeless? And what is all the development doing to Israel's ever-fragile ecology?

Away from these murky corners, there is the broad sunlight of having made it. Public service is efficient or automatic. Tolerance for shoddiness in services and products is declining; medical service is generally excellent, innovative, professional. Israel is rapidly becoming a state of the art place - in most areas that count in making life more comfortable, and in a sense, more moral and sensitive. Its leading men and women of letters are widely translated; its theater is performed at international festivals. Israel's political life is firmly positioned in the democratic world. There is rowdiness before elections, but there are no tanks on the street on the morning after them. The press and the media are free, and highly critical. There are still three opinions wherever there are two Jews.

Without a doubt, the process is part and parcel of what the early political Zionists had in mind when they envisioned the Jews in their own land as normal, freed of complexes, excessive reflectiveness, yet confident, energetic, and competent. Many Israelis who have never read the treatises recognize the accomplishment. They are confident, sometimes allowing themselves a certain arrogance. But that will probably go away, if only because it is bad for (international) business.

The achievement cuts two ways. Being as good as America and Europe is enough if there is something in ideology and identity that is more, or at least significantly different, than what happens in these Western continents of achievement. Otherwise it is like "keeping up with the Joneses" when you can - in the open world of today - be Jones, if you wish. Where the

real Joneses live, you do not have to put up with religious zealots, the constant threat of terror and war, the uncaptalistic notion gnawing at you that, yes, "all Israelites are responsible for one another."

Which will win out? Identity, and some self-limiting rootedness? Or getting ahead, which is best done for the individual and the country itself by travelling light - unburdened by moral and fraternal, yet "irrational," commitments?

Educators are beginning to realize that it is at this national and existential juncture that their most pressing concerns are located. Israeli society is coming to understand that its future depends on education. Some would say that even in Israel it is not superfluous to explicitly add: Jewish education.

Otherwise it is like "Keeping up with The Joneses," when you can - in the open world of today - be Jones, if you wish.

## PART THREE: THE CHALLENGE OF AMERICAN ZIONISM

The history recounted in Part One of this essay constitutes the pre-history of most American Jewish encounters with Israel. King David and the Maccabees, the stirring conquest of the

promised land and bitter exile from it, fill childhood imaginations among contemporary American Jews as they have for Jews across the centuries, everywhere. What is more, they continue to haunt and nourish adult minds. The land that first came to life for many an American Jew in posters on the wall at Hebrew School, sustaining many lazy reveries on a late Thursday afternoon, often lives on through larger-than-life heroes such as Golda Meir (and, later, Yitzhak Rabin). Heroic national achievements - whether the ingathering of the exiles, or the rescue at Entebbe - take place on a scale that dwarfs local federation campaigns and synagogue building drives.

Here lies the primary difficulty in creating and sustaining a connection between Diaspora Jews and Israel. Diaspora Jews generally relate to the land, the state, and even the people of Israel as myth. And they have no choice but to do so. For myths can be appreciated from afar, whereas the complexities of everyday reality cannot. The heart can swell in Cleveland or San Antonio at images of a people reborn, deserts reclaimed, ideals made actual, and life snatched from the clutches of mass death. But what can one do, there and elsewhere, with the nitty-gritty of bureaucracy and political infighting, with unemployment and pollution, even if the growth in GNP is spectacular, and the myth - in the persons of immigrants from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union - lives on amidst the everyday and in fact causes many of the problems through which the myth is dissipated? The very success of Zionism, and the creation of Israel's real-life society, have ironically rendered the State impossible to grasp from afar. For this understanding one must come close - which most Jews in America of course have not done.

They have not visited, even once. They have not acquired the literacy in Hebrew which would facilitate appreciation of cultural products and daily newspapers from across the ocean. They do not read publications such as the *Jerusalem Report* or the *Jerusalem Post* on a regular basis. It is no surprise, then, that American Jews born after the Holocaust and the creation of the State - lacking first-hand witness of the myth-in-action - do not have the same profound feeling for Israel as did previous generations. For the latter, blue JNF boxes

were ubiquitous, and heated debates over the proper direction of Zionism are a memory never to be forgotten. So too were debates over whether Zionism was compatible with Judaism on the one hand or American patriotism on the other.

There is a further problem: if many American Jews do not really know what to do with Israel, even as myth, how to place it in the mosaic of self-identity, it is because myths of long ago and far away can be integrated into daily life in the here and now only if they are not attached to someone else's here and now; not brought down to earth at another point of specificity; not claimed (and interpreted differently) by people who in the abstract (according to myth) are related but who speak a foreign tongue and live a life far removed from one's own. What shall one do with them, the story they claim, the spin they put on it? How can it all be brought close?

**The answer traditionally provided by American Zionism** to this question has been: do not bring it close. Louis Brandeis "translated" Herzl's political Zionism for American ears by eliminating its sting, the "negation of the Diaspora." American Jews, Brandeis insisted, were not doomed to the cruel Herzlian choice between assimilation and anti-semitism in exile, or emigration to the Jewish State. They themselves had no need of a homeland, having already arrived and been welcomed at the greatest home the world had even known. Zionism was a way of providing a home for Jews who did need it, and thereby of extending the dream shared by Judaism's prophets and America's founding fathers - freedom, justice, opportunity for all - to Jews denied it by poverty and persecution. American Zionists as a rule did not understand their commitment to be one of self-realization through *aliyah*. They would "build" the Land but not "be built" through it. Their Zionism involved no transformation of the self. It was, in a word, philanthropy.

When Solomon Schechter, the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, joined other American Jewish leaders in promoting Ahad Ha'am's brand of "cultural Zionism," he too introduced a fundamental change in it. The work of national regeneration, he believed,

would bring Jews back to the religion of their ancestors - an outcome which Ahad Ha'am believed impossible. More than a difference of theory was involved. The cultural renaissance which for Ahad Ha'am was the goal of Zionism, its purpose and *raison d'être*, was for Schechter and those like him merely a means. Ahad Ha'am pictured a spiritual center in the Land of Israel creating Jewish culture and exporting it to the Diaspora, the culture living fully only in and through the activities of those who actually inhabited the land of Israel. Schechter, however, pictured Jews living full religious lives - thanks to the revitalized center - throughout the Diaspora, as they had for two millennia. One could be a Jew wherever there were Diaspora institutions such as synagogues, schools, and seminaries like Schechter's. The center would remain very much in service to the Diaspora. The homeland would be the instrument of the Jewish people's flourishing everywhere.

This point of view became explicit in Mordecai Kaplan's book, *A New Zionism*, published in 1955 - the most important statement on Zionism by the most influential American Jewish thinker of the century. Kaplan had written unequivocally in his magnum opus, *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934), that American Jews could experience Judaism only as a "subordinate civilization," and that only Jews in Palestine could have Judaism be their "primary civilization." There is no reason to believe he changed his mind on this point. But he proclaimed in the later work, a bare seven years after the State's creation, that "Zionism has to be redefined so as to assure a permanent place for Diaspora Judaism." The claim is extraordinary, and takes us at once to the gap in self-perception which has plagued dialogue between Israeli and American Jewish leaders for nearly fifty years now. Kaplan set forth what should perhaps be called the credo of American Zionism: namely that the Jewish State exists in order to help the Jewish people "become a fit instrument of this-worldly salvation for every Jew, wherever he resides." In helping their Israeli "others," then, American Jews were in reality helping themselves.

**This is not what Ben Gurion had in mind**, to say the least. Nor does it accord with the understanding of most Israeli Jews, who have more and more come to resent American

paternalism and to insist that they hold the central place in contemporary Jewish history. The building on the campus of Tel Aviv University, which in English is called the Diaspora Museum, is called in Hebrew, the Home of the Diasporas. Israel is the only home Jews could possibly have, according to a common Israeli conviction. The Jewish State, reborn in the Holy Land, is the inevitable outcome of Jewish wanderings - and the only location of Jewish life which will remain once every current Diaspora way-station exists only as an exhibit in this or another museum.



## PART FOUR: ISRAEL ISSUES THROUGH THE EYES OF NORTH AMERICAN JEWS

In our generation, there is a felt desire to achieve greater understanding between Israeli and Diaspora Jews. This requires greater humility on both sides before the vicissitudes of history than either Kaplan or Ben Gurion could muster. Increased knowledge of each other's origins and achievements will also help. Even so, however, the encounter of Diaspora Jews with Israel that we, in this essay, are hoping to foster should not aim to result in agreement. That is not the point of the exercise, and certainly not the standard by which its achievement should be judged. It would be enough to set the two parties over against one another, have them see and listen to one another in the midst of Israel's landscape. That challenge is huge enough. In this spirit, we return to the five topics outlined in Part Two.



The most obvious problem with "the Land of Judaism" is that most American Jews have no substantive connection to Judaism; indeed, one of the main purposes of "Israel experiences" and "missions," whatever the age of those involved, is fostering such a connection. Some twenty percent of American Jews will have no relationship to a Jewish institution over the course of their entire lives. Barely half are connected by actual membership at any given moment. On the other hand, signs of vitality abound; a growing minority of American Jews does accord Judaism and the Jewish community a central place in their lives. Israel has played a key role in the formation of these identities. But can it continue to do so on a broader scale? Will not the identification of Israel with Judaism - which most American Jews have chosen time and again over their lives not to embrace in any significant way - preclude the relationship which we are trying to foster?

# 1. Israel as the Land of Judaism

It might; but one has no choice, given the indelible connection in every Jewish (and Christian) American consciousness between the land and the sacred histories played out upon it. There is some evidence, too, that just as American Jews who might not actually "believe in God" (whatever they interpret the declaration to mean) may experience signals of "transcendence" and be open to the presence of ultimate meaning, so too they might thrill to the antiquity of the holy land, the connection it affords to a mysterious and grand history that spans three millennia. One need not believe in the God once worshipped on the Temple Mount to experience a surge of meaning when walking its precincts (or the tunnels underneath). Nor does the pastness of all this history necessarily interfere with the sense of connection. On the contrary, it may make the relation safe. The past is past, thank goodness. Those who parade in the black garb of bygone centuries thankfully make their outdated loyalties clear, most American Jews would say, beyond all threat of contagion or imitation. The holiness of these sites is, all things considered, therefore a plus, a draw. We all want - and perhaps even need - to experiment with the sacred, in order to learn how much we will permit ourselves to be touched by it, and changed.

**A similar attraction** born of distance holds with regard to the holiness of the land. American Jews are overwhelmingly not farmers, or even active gardeners. They have the urban dweller's normal romance of the land, wilderness and pastoral alike. Israel's attraction to American Jews in past generations lay in no small measure in its kibbutzim, the proud rejection of commerce and the professions in favor of a life the Diaspora visitor would not choose but wishes, in a small corner of consciousness, that he or she could try out for a time. The decline of the kibbutzim in recent years is likely to arouse the same perplexity among American Jews - and the same subliminal satisfaction - as the failure of secular Israelis to be "religious" in the American manner. (We will turn in a moment to American dismay at the apparent move by many Israelis to become too religious, in part by voting for religious political parties: an idea which to American Jews, fearful of the Christian right, is anathema.) American Jews still take immense satisfaction in the sight and smell of fields cultivated by

Jewish hands. This does not require an ideology of labor, à la A.D. Gordon. All that is needed is nostalgia: vague longings for a time of genuine community and purer faith - a time populated by venerated ancestors.

A more immediate connection with Israel as holy land is furnished by Israel's status as the place in which the holy work of the people Israel is again most visibly accomplished. Israel is the site of the project which called the Jewish people into being - becoming "a kingdom of priests and holy nation" - and which gives purpose to its existence still. American Jews take pride in the Jewish tradition of social activism, and believe that they carry it on through their own labors. To the degree that Israel lives up to the prophetic ideal in the sight of all the nations, it elevates Diaspora souls. Injustice, taken for granted in one's home community, is grating and alienating when encountered in the holy land. The green and brown of that earth - the first sight of which visitors eagerly crane the neck to see out airplane windows - appeals in part because it is the earth that prophets once walked and impoverished immigrants still kiss. American Jews will likely always hold Israel to a standard which they would not impose on themselves or their country; when pressed they recognize that this is unfair and irrational, but continue to do so nonetheless. They would perhaps argue correctly that they have no choice. In Israel the demand for holiness, if not its actual achievement, comes with the territory.

Jewish peoplehood is a myth for American Jews - larger than life, but rarely if ever experienced first-hand. It is, to that degree, very much a fiction. True any Jew not engaged in massive denial

## 2. Israel as the Land

# Where the Jews Live as a People

knows that the Holocaust aimed at encompassing him or her too, and but for allied armies (and perhaps divine intervention) might well have done so. It takes only another increment of self-awareness for American Jews to recognize that Israel touches them as well: hence the shudder at its enemies' attacks, the outrage at the state's failures and imperfections. A positive sense of Jewish peoplehood is another matter, generally lacking. One has experienced synagogues, organizations, local federations, but American Jewry as a whole? Unless one goes to a General Assembly or other national meeting, the words do not compute. All the more so is this true of the Jewish people - a greatly-extended family that one knows is out there, and is perhaps eager to experience, but that remains for most an idea, an image, unfurnished as yet with content.

The hope of making Jewish peoplehood more than a fiction or a hope perhaps draws American Jews to Israel. It is part of what they want to feel there, and unless they are kept (as many visitors are) in a cocoon of careful programming, they likely will. The best site of encounter may well be a public bus: teeming with varied faces and physiognomies and yet, one knows, united by external enemies (the terrorist bombers have made this graphic) as well as self-chosen destiny. The act of traveling together, literally, may well suggest to them for the first time that they are bound up with Jews around the world, even if Jews are not exactly unified. So too the tangible presence of the Holocaust in Israel, the stories heard from survivors and children of survivors, pieces of a history that come together and are reinforced by the clear and present national danger to the existence of the Jewish State and so to the Jewish people. All of this comes home to one in Israel, indeed contributes to the eerie sense that one has come home.

**Lie awake at night** because of jet lag, turn on the radio by the bed and flip the dials, and one hears Arabic all around except for the distant and familiar sounds of the BBC or Voice of America - and the soothing Hebrew melodies of Israel. It is all the more vivid, in the dark: more fearful to know who one is and who one is not, and then perhaps strangely comforting. What one does with this in the light of day, or back at home, is another matter;

how one renegotiates one's identity as American Jew and Jewish American, if that proves necessary. But the process has begun. One has recognized connection not only to the holy land and the ideal project underway upon it but to the worldwide people concentrated in this place as it has not been for two millennia. That people is now exposed, vulnerable, available, active. It works collectively on a grand scale, without apparent reduction in its diversity. That is a lot for the newcomer to absorb.

■

"Every state is founded on force," the great sociologist Max Weber quoted from Leon Trotsky, the "non-Jewish Jew." In Israel this is immediately apparent, and a source of powerful sensation to the visitor. Everywhere there are Jews with guns. Indeed, in nearly exact reversal of the Diaspora, where few policemen are Jewish, where it is a point of pride for Jews not to hunt, and where relatively few Jews serve in the all-volunteer army, in Israel carrying a gun is

a mark of Jewish identity, guns being denied to Arabs who have not served in the army, which is the vast majority of them. The Jews are the soldiers. Teenage American boys may readily identify with the soldiers; teenage girls may find them attractive; adults may also discover such kindly feelings in their hearts while reflecting on their own mixed feelings at the sight of Jewish power. This is perhaps at the core of what American Jews are countering when they come to Israel, the focus of the Israeli's "otherness."

However, several features of Israel qua Jewish state complicate the raw encounter with Jewish power. One - a negative for many Diaspora Jews - is Israel's political chaos, the lack of etiquette in Knesset debates, the vitriolic free-for-all that fills the newspapers on a daily basis. With the state's enemies so powerful, and the blessing of the state's existence after two mil-

### 3. Israel as a Political Entity

lennia so palpable, one would think the parties could get their act together, and act together for the sake of Jews and Judaism. How can it be true that "we are one" if Israelis themselves are so divided? Jewish politics, played out on the scale of a state rather than an organization like Federation or Hadassah, is often not only perplexing but deeply disturbing.

**Then there is the fact of patriotism,** which is out of style in the West, but still present to a significant (even if reduced) degree in Israel. How wave the blue and white flag, even nostalgically, when one no longer feels comfortable waving the red, white, and blue? How cheer for Israel's soldiers when one reacts to one's own military with skepticism? Aren't nationalism and ethnic assertiveness a source of strife and calamity everywhere in the world today, wreaking havoc in the former Yugoslavia and threatening to tear even Canada apart? Even in America, the rancor of identity politics is increasingly ugly and a cause of concern to Jews. How then embrace Jewish nationalism unequivocally in Israel - particularly in the face of Palestinian claims that they too deserve a portion of the land, and Israeli Arab claims that they have been denied the full rights of citizenship in the State of Israel? Can a Jewish State truly be democratic? The questions may be new to Diaspora visitors; and they are disturbing.

Finally, Israel can seemingly justify its frequent resort to force, its reliance on the guns which are ubiquitous, only by appeal to the Jews' status as victim. They are still out to destroy us, for the moment with suicide bombers rather than with invading armies. We are barely five million; they are tens of millions. We are, if no longer entirely alone, nearly so. We therefore have no choice but to protect ourselves forcefully, often causing suffering to others in the process.

This is distasteful to many Diaspora (as to many Israeli) Jews, on several counts. Having trumpeted the Jews' claim to victimization for twenty years in America, and built a Holocaust museum to document the claim for generations to come, American Jews are now finding that others - principally blacks - are using the language of victimization to press claims, particularly against Jews. The community has as a result soured on appeals to vic-

timization. Nor are Diaspora Jews any more comfortable than Israelis with the ascription of weakness, the memory of suffering. Better perhaps to sin than be sinned against by Arabs - though the justification of the "sinning" by the "being sinned against" is no less a source of discomfort. One suspects that many Diaspora Jews have chosen never to visit Israel in part to avoid confrontation with these features of Jewish existence at the end of the twentieth century. Better to remain inside "fortress America," and face the cruel choices of political life not as a Jew, a member of a threatened people, but as a citizen of the most powerful state on earth.

■ Here we come to a paradox: to the degree that Israeli culture is authentically Israeli, growing out of the Israeli reality and responding to its particular circumstances, it will be inaccessible to most American Jews. To the degree that it partakes of the universal modern culture of the west, it will be accessible - but not especially Israeli, and so not a worthy part of an Israel experience. It is assuring to learn that the paintings on the wall

## 4. Israel as the Land of Jewish Culture

at the Tel Aviv galleries look very similar to those on view in New York and San Francisco, but it makes one wonder why one needed a "spiritual center" in order to create this culture, Jewish only indirectly, perhaps not even in name. Why - except for superficial purposes of adorning one's home with Israeli goods - would one want to import such objects to America? On the other hand, to the degree that Israeli culture takes place in Hebrew, on stage or on the page, or reflects an experience of the world not shared by Diaspora Jews, it will remain opaque to Diaspora sensibility, and reduce the sense of connection. The alienation may be all the greater if the culture on view is Jewish and yet strange. There is no quick-fix overcoming of this problem; myth is more easily appropriated than the particularities of reali-

ty, including cultural reality.

One element of the Israeli scene, however, can be immediately grasped: the public character of Jewishness - Purim on the streets and on the busses; the singing and tinkle of silverware from a thousand succot; the peace of Shabbat in Jerusalem; the calendar mirroring Jewish rather than gentile rhythms; the presence of kippot and *kapotes*. American Jews cannot but notice that religion is a vital part of Israeli culture. The fact surprises and perhaps upsets them. Religion is not meant to infuse all of life, by common definition, and Judaism - for all that one defines it in public as a "way of life" - functions in American reality and understanding as a religion. Culture is TV, Hollywood, the museum, the symphony. It can be Jewish only in the way that Mel Brooks and Seinfeld are Jewish, at best in the way that *Schindler's List* is Jewish. Individuals make it so. Collective Jewish culture appears strange.

It reminds American Jews how far they have traveled to reach this place, Israel. The fact of public Jewish culture is overwhelming to them. It is a feature that they struggle to process while in Israel; they may well wonder upon returning to America whether it can in any way find a parallel there, and if not, how much they will miss it. Their former notions of identity and Jewishness are thereby challenged.

The questioning is all the more acute because the present generation of Americans, including Jews, does not seem to derive the meaning from high culture that its parents did, perhaps because the divide separating high from popular culture has all but vanished in the contemporary West. One does not as a rule turn to music or the arts to fill transcendent holes of meaning in the self. Culture is rather a source of pleasure and entertainment. Jewish culture is consequently a source of satisfaction, when one experiences it in America, a source of welcome connection to ancestors or tradition, an assertion and confirmation of one's acceptance, but Jews are unlikely to turn to it for more than that. In Israel it seems by contrast to play a central role, vital to sustaining a new and still fragile sort of identity.



You are riding back to the airport, head and heart full to overflowing with the sensations of Israel, and there in the night sky, on the hills of Mevaseret Zion, just outside of Jerusalem, rise the golden arches of McDonalds. The sight perhaps stimulates other memories: traffic jams rivaling those of America (though the roads are generally narrower), beaches where the same sun beats down on the same swimsuits; supermarkets stuffed more than ever before with every American and European product. Diaspora Jewish visitors have likely come to appreciate the achievement of this normalcy. No more rationing. No more tents or corrugated huts. No more dire need, perhaps, for

## 5. Israel as a Thriving Western Country, Living a Natural Life

American philanthropy. Israelis have garnered a place for Jews among the nations, and a spot on the cable TV listings to prove it. So the question asserts itself: okay - now what? Jews are not used to being okay. And, of course, we still aren't. Israel demands security in its peace negotiations because it still lacks security, and perhaps always will. American Jews therefore don't have to confront the total realization of the Zionist dream, which awaits peace, and so are spared the full impact of its challenge to the opposing path that they have chosen for themselves. For the moment, anyway, even New York seems more secure than Tel Aviv. And the choice is not, as Herzl put it, between assimilation and antisemitism on the one hand, and coming "home" to normalcy on the other. America offers Jews, at least in potential, a life of pleasant distinctiveness, not too much or too little apartness, access to transcendent meaning and a proud history, with minimal cost of overt hostility, amidst unparalleled acceptance and achievement.

Does Israel's achievement of a comparable and very similar daily life - the same patterns of romance and career, the same worries of child-rearing and traffic fatalities, the same complaints about the media and the politicians - make Israel more or less attractive to American Jews, more or less of a challenge to their own commitments, more or less a spur to the re-examination of their relation to the Jewish people and to Judaism? Time will tell. One suspects that individual reactions will in this area, more than in others, continue to differ markedly.

## PART FIVE: CONCLUSION

We have spoken of Israel as being "mythic" for Diaspora Jews, by which we meant that its attraction, such as it is, lies largely in its distance, in the seeming divide between Israel and the reality of Jewish life in the Diaspora. Israel is intense, provocative and bothersome: Jewish life in the Diaspora, at least at the moment, provides a degree of Jewish sub-identity, individually measured and chosen.

We have suggested that many Diaspora Jews do not want to get too close and that they have their reasons. The ethos of Israel, as a society still not really safe, and perhaps still caught up in a syndrome of "the victim," can appear jarring. Universal culture, though plentiful in Israel, can be had elsewhere; the specifically Jewish culture of the country, public and disturbingly religious, as often creates identity crises as solves them. Israel, then, is best kept at arm's length, seen through mythic spectacles which color matters so that one sees "something Jewish out there" but what one sees is not real enough to challenge or disrupt a comfortable reality, and there is nothing one has to do with it.

# CONCLUSION

The major issue facing the Jewish educator who wishes to deal with Israel in Jewish education shapes up as the following: Are we going to cultivate and perpetuate distance and nourish a sense of the exotic about Israel, or shall we nourish possibilities and opportunities for true familiarity and encounter? And if the latter, how can encounter happen between those who seem so different? Are we to manufacture and package counterfeit myths that hold reality at a distance or invite learners to address a larger-than-everyday-life reality?

Actually, there may be no choice. Myths are important, in education and life as a whole, when they help us see general and larger-than-life truths. But when myths are a tapestry of scenes from unreal worlds, they become an escape from reality. And that kind of myth,

which we are calling "counterfeit," has been fading for several generations. There are no more remote scenes and places for the mythic imagination to dwell upon, just as there are no more inaccessible and magnificent kings and queens who are totally different and can remove us from ourselves. The Messianic age, which could feasibly still be anticipated for excellent inherently religious reasons, is now often existentially irrelevant to Jews who see it as a fairy tale: they now see the world, or at least their world, as sufficiently satisfactory - if not "the best of all possible worlds," at least good enough.

**Counterfeit myths** therefore recede and become outlandish and finally, uninteresting. There are several advantages to this state of affairs. First, when people confront a reality that was "sold" to them as mythical, such as the actual life of Israel, they often ask: Why does reality intrude, to ruin the myth? Then they become angry, disillusioned, turned off, and they keep away. But where myths no longer place rose-colored glasses on the eyes of the beholder, it often turns out that the reality is vastly more interesting and challenging than any mythic one. What makes sense for the world of myth easily becomes dream-like, reflecting only what is (authentically or sentimentally) within; whereas reality is comparably wider, filled with human potentialities of all kinds, blatantly problematic.

We can take this one step further and say that some myths seem to sabotage any possibility of genuine religious faith and activity. Such myths bespeak remoteness, and dream worlds, and idols. Religion, on the other hand, is about real responsibility and about God who imposes it, right now and right here. "It [God's commandment] is not in heaven or across the sea," teaches the Torah, "but in your heart and mouth to do it." What religion demands arises out of concrete social and hence moral situations, and what it anticipates stems from a moral relationship with a reality always tainted, always in need of repair (*tikkun*). Specifically, the Messiah continues to be real for those who see this world as not the best of all possible ones, who refuse to escape responsibility by confusing the homes and streets of suburbia with the world in which they live.

In fact, given the high degree of education and culture among modern Western Jews, one might well wonder why any educator would wish to cultivate counterfeit myths in contemporary Jewry or bemoan their demise. One plausible explanation, and it is difficult to think of any other, is that mythic memories are confused with culture and myth itself is confused with religion. Given that mind-set, Israel becomes a remote place where that strangely unreal thing called Jewish culture is on exhibit, and religion as an exotic museum-like piece makes Jewish myth (still!) come alive.

If our analysis is sound, then educators are well advised to teach about Israel as it is, and what that can mean for Jews throughout the world.

But why should educators do so? Why is this important?

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Jews from the Diaspora are not used to thinking of themselves as members of a Jewish nation among the nations. In lands of freedom and opportunity, they have learned to see themselves not only as equal citizens but as full-fledged members of former host societies in which they are no longer guests.

In Israel it is different, hence sometimes disturbing and embarrassing, but offering great opportunities borne of responsibility. This difference enables us to gain another perspective, to see another dimension of Jewish life.

## Among the Nations

It is told of David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, that he once debated in Jerusalem a well-known American rabbi about the mutual relations that American Jewry and Israeli Jewry should cultivate. When Ben Gurion demanded that American (and all Diaspora) Jews recognize Israel's primacy, the rabbi disagreed: "Remember, Mr. Ben Gurion," he said, "we are

the two greatest Jewish communities in the world, we should be equal partners." To which Ben Gurion retorted: "At the moment (in the nineteen fifties) we are less numerous than you. But bear in mind that while you are a community within the American people, we are the American people of this place."

Learning about Israel, for Jews and for non-Jews, is learning about the Jews as a nation. Yet those who are learning, as it were, from the outside, do so because they are Jews and this nation somehow belongs to them and claims kinship with them. How can that be?

**The heart of the matter**, we suggest, is that this nation living in Israel will never be as normal as others. It will always have a people beyond its borders. It will be a national homeland for Jews, but even Israeli Jews will never be defined only by territory, while those who live elsewhere will hopefully be well acquainted with the land which is, in some undefinable sense, also theirs.

Strangely, the project of normalization that distinguished almost all truly modern Jews in the last several centuries, in which they invested heavily and achieved greatly, has not succeeded and probably, never will. As long as Jewish life that is historically recognizable persists, the Jewish people will not be a religion among religions or a nation among nations. Whenever, in difficult or exhilarating moments, we shall hear them saying "we" the reference may be to political events in Europe, or to the discovery of oil in the Negev: to a shared anxiety or a common stroke of luck. Jews who pray, whether in Dimona or Alaska, that God "bless His people Israel with peace" will sometimes be thinking of a political process underway between the State of Israel and its neighbors, or, with equal plausibility and fervor, of the civic well-being of Jews, threatened or achieved, in the former Soviet Union or elsewhere. Or perhaps they will be referring to the inner peace that may, at happy historical moments, characterize Jews when there is no causeless strife among them.

The secret of their survival, of the inner richness and complexity of their inner life, will never be restricted to that peculiar peoplehood of the House of Israel, world-wide, but it

will always be related to it.

There is a mystery about Jewish life. At the center of it is the living people of Israel and its God, and the gifts and demands called Torah. The Land of Israel is also somewhere near the center of the mystery, and the mystery cannot be truly understood without being "on the inside" of what the state of Israel is about. For those who learn about it and experience it, the mystery is thickly felt, like its summer sun pouring out of a cloudless blue sky. But as they become familiar with the land, knowing its people, its problems and hopes, they come to realize that this mystery is not a fairy tale.